Music in the Classroom

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract ………………………………………………….………………………. 3

Introduction ……………………………………………….……………...…….... 3

Statement of the Problem .……………...………………………………... 4

Review of Related Literature (The Pros) ………………………………… 5

Review of Related Literature (The Cons) ………………………………... 6

Educational Theorists …………………………………………………….. 8

Current Implementation …………………………………………………... 9

Statement of the Hypothesis ………………….………………………….. 10

Method

Participants (N) ………………………………………………………….. 10

Instrument (s) ……………………………………………………………. 10

Experimental Design

Procedure

Results

Discussion

Implications

References ………………………………………………………………………… 11

Appendices

Appendix A, Parental Consent Form ….………………………………….. 14

Appendix B, Principal Consent Form ………………………………..…… 15

**Abstract**

During periods of economic cutbacks within the United States of America, state funding of various programs through the government are often reduced. Public schools are being forced to accommodate a small budget and therefore selective programs that are deemed as not academically valuable are cut from elementary school curriculums. The subjects that are not included in statewide school testing are prime targets for school cutbacks. As a result, arts programs such as music within the performing arts are slowly being eliminated from schools across the country as teachers and administration try to improve their scores on tests. The teaching of music concepts within the classroom and the use of music during instruction can help many students gain overall academic success and inspire personal achievement and growth.

In order to determine how successful implementing music concepts and music during instruction into the classroom would be, I will complete an action research study that introduces such practices into a Kindergarten classroom. This study will focus on a Kindergarten class comprised of fifteen students in a public school in Brooklyn, New York. The students will be presented with literacy instruction using music as a common thread. Students will then be given tests that will reflect their overall learning experience and the affect that music had on their academic achievement.

**Introduction**

Students learn at different stages throughout childhood and through different mediums in which lessons are presented. To ensure that all students are given the opportunity to successfully learn in our classroom, multiple teaching styles should be presented through various subjects. These programs should include literacy, mathematics, science, social studies and various art mediums.

The schools that suffer from economic cutbacks in federal school budgets are those elementary schools that once offered programs in the arts. Economic recessions create widespread budget cutbacks that greatly affect the public school system. As a result, job retention and hiring consist of multi-subject and special education teachers, versus those who specialize in the arts (Rotherham, Phillips. 2011).

**Statement of the Problem**

Economic recessions create widespread budget cutbacks that greatly affect the public school system. As a result, job retention and hiring consists of multi-subject and special education teachers, versus those who specialize in the arts (Rotherham, 2011. Phillips, 2011). Therefore, programs such as music within the performing arts are being eliminated from schools. Legislation forces schools to shift classroom time and funding to the tested subjects rather than all subjects possible, which also shifted the focus on where that money is to be spent (Chapman, 2005. Wallis, 2008. Wills, 2007.).

Testing is now the determining factor in students and teacher success. Therefore teachers and administrators are forced to teach the test with a heavy focus on literacy, mathematics, science and social studies. This means that the arts are not covered in classrooms in the same detail as the other subjects and sometimes not at all. Regardless of the students’ academic achievement through literacy, mathematics, science and social studies children need to have access to the arts.

The problem arises because these programs are no longer available to the students and schools who benefit from their existence in their curriculums. Music programs would be assets to elementary schools because they encompass self-expression and provide tools for various styles of learning. The teaching of the music can offer personal expression and creative outlets to problems that these students encounter on a daily basis.

**Review of Related Literature**

**The Pros**

According to research, arts based educational research has the ability to contribute to particular insights in various types of learning (O’Donoghue, 2009). There are many researchers who argue that the arts play an important role in childhood education. Music is crucial to personal growth and understanding within children of all ages. Practicing music during instruction can improve cognitive ability to remember, therefore children retain and understand more of the concepts and content being taught. The performing arts, such as music can improve social skills between peers and creates communication with teachers and students as well. It can also improve physical and emotional abilities through expression and movement by the means on kinesthetic learning (George, 2000. Ulbricht, 2011)

The arts encourage children to question material and create visual images (DeMers, 1996). Students given the choice in the type of music played may feel more in control of his or her learning. This in itself may provide a positive change in students’ academic success (DeMers, 1996). Music can also give children alternative perspectives to those who may have different viewpoints. Listening to various types of music, such as pieces with a soft tempo compared to those with a fast tempo, can give children the opportunity to gain control of their emotions. Therefore musical activities can promote conflict resolution (Wilhelm, 2006; Miller, 2011). Playing background music or teaching students to memorize content through songs and poems might relieve test anxiety and therefore increase their performance on an assessment (DeMers, 1996). Background music can be used to provide a welcoming atmosphere and help prepare and motivate students for learning tasks. Music stabilized mental, physical and emotional rhythms to attain a state of deep concentration and focus in which large amounts of content information can be processed and learned (Wilhelm, 2006; Miller, 2011; Mark, 2003).

Once educators have opened their minds to the possibilities that music education brings to literacy instruction, many will find that leaning becomes internalized in a meaningful way. Using music as a means of learning in the classroom is effective in helping children retain information on an emotional level. Therefore the arts create various new educational and cultural experiences without stepping out of the classroom (Miller, 2011).

**The Cons**

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) counts three subjects as ‘core’ subjects. Therefore there is no balance between the arts and the tested curriculums. Tested subjects always get more attention over non-tested subjects (Chapman, 2005). If the focus of instruction were on the arts, instructional time would be taken away from the subjects that students are tested on. Teachers are scrutinized if test scores drop in other tested curriculum areas, therefore not many want to take the chance to stray far from teaching the test (Wills, 2007). The lower the scores, the lower the school rating (Manzo, 2008. Wills, 2007).

Some teachers are uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the arts processes, curriculum and standards. Both teachers and students can be faced with certain challenges when teaching and learning the arts. Therefore many teachers do not wish to teach through dramatic practices (Stanfa, O Shea, 1998. Miller, 2011). When teachers and students are uncomfortable while learning, exploration can be limited. Teacher frustration is likely to be taken out on the students and vice versa. When students are frustrated they tend to act out in various ways, whether it is behavioral or emotional. Therefore many educators prefer to teach the subjects they are comfortable with or prepared to teach, which is primarily literacy, math and science. The arts presentation and implementation in the classroom can take more preparation than other curricular subjects when teachers are not properly trained in how to create and implement them (Sanders. 2006). Since many teachers lack this training, whether from college courses or professional development, they tend to shy away from planning these lessons and feeling like a failure when they do not go as planned (Sanders, 2006).

Assessments are data that every teacher is required to obtain after each lesson. Assessments determine the students’ retention of the content being taught. This can be difficult for teachers to judge from musical activities. The teachers have no paper trail to back up their grades for these activities. Creative arts also allows for freedom, expression and creativity, which varies from child to child. The power is shifted from the teacher to the students, who then have more input in the direction the lesson takes. This is where the lesson becomes more student directed and to some teachers this is a scary thought.

**Educational Theorists**

There are a few educational theorists who have played a large role in researching this topic and some that have contributed through similar research. Lev Vygotsky had a major influence on views on children’s play. He believed that social interaction plays a large role in cognitive development. Vygotsky felt that only once social interaction has occurred can an individual understand on a personal level (Hausfather, 1996). In order to support this theory teachers should collaborate with their students to help facilitate meaning and learning through the arts. Children tend to imitate the world, as they perceive it, in order to make meaning of it from their own opinions and understandings. Since play is self-initiated and pleasurable, children are highly motivated, which is an important condition for leaning (Hausfather, 1996). In other words, teachers should work together with the students in order to allow them to explore musical activities in order to promote academic success in literacy instruction.

Bloom’s Taxonomy presents educational theories that look at higher levels of understanding and learning within the development at various stages in a child’s life. Bloom’s taxonomy includes expressing knowledge, application, comprehension, analysis, synthesis and evaluation through educational learning. This theory can be one mean of helping achieve such desired goals in the classroom, such as researching student comprehension and understanding of various subjects, including literacy with music as a common thread.

Howard Gardner is an educational theorist who researched multiple intelligences. These intelligences include musical intelligence, which involves skill in the performance, composition and appreciation of musical patterns. According to Howard Gardner musical intelligence runs in an almost structural parallel to linguistic intelligence (DiEdwardo, 2005). This emphasizes education for understanding rather than rote memory or the mimicking of skills. Gardner also theorized about interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences, which includes understanding one’s own motivations and the motivations of others in the process of learning. Music allows children to look at their own motivations, and the motivations of others to reach a common goal or achievement.

**Current Implementations**

There are many teachers and educators who are implementing musical activities into their literacy lessons in the classroom to ensure that their students can learn by means of the arts. Brenda Rosler is an elementary school teacher who implemented these ideas into her fifth-grade classroom. She regularly teaches the Foundations of Literacy and assessment and intervention in Language Arts. Through assessment, she found that the arts infused lesson plans unite classes, and create leaders in learning (Mark, 2003).

Chris Boyd Brewer believes that music provides a positive environment for students and “enhanced interaction and helps develop a sense of community and cooperation. Music and arts education a whole is a powerful tool to use in the classroom” (Minott, 2015). This can be done by selecting a classroom theme song, or developing a classroom “ritual,” such as a good-bye or hello time that uses music (Minott, 2015). The creation of music in lessons expresses inner thoughts and feelings and develops the musical intelligence through understanding rhythm, pitch and form. This allows the students to relate to the content and express how they feel about issues brought up in historic incidents, social studies and topics in literature.

**Statement of the Hypothesis**

Integrating music activities within literacy classroom instruction over a period of time, for cumulative twenty minutes per week (diversified times), to fifteen Kindergarten students at Public School X in Brooklyn, New York, will increase their academic achievement and overall literacy test scores.

**Participants**

The participants of my action research project will be fifteen students in the Kindergarten ICT classroom of Public School X. The students’ age range is from 5-6 years. There are eight girls and seven boys present as well as two teachers and one paraprofessional.

**Instruments**

The researcher will require permission from the principal and will then send a consent form to the classroom parents explaining the study. The purpose of this study is to test the effectiveness of music activities within literacy classroom instruction in the classroom. Students will be given an assessment for the lesson generated without music instruction in order to see what information the students possess. Then the students will be given an assessment after the music activity is implemented into literacy instruction in order to see the effectiveness of the lesson in information retention.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A: Parental Consent Form**

Dear Parents/ Guardians,

My name is Jessica Mandell and I am currently a graduate student in the Childhood Education program at the City University of New York at Brooklyn College. I am conducting an action research study to see if children’s academic achievement in literacy will benefit by using music practices as a common thread. I am requesting your permission to have your child participate in this research study. All of the lessons will be administered during your child’s scheduled classroom instruction for this subject, and all standards and lesson objectives will be addressed and accomplished.

All results of this research project will be reported as a group study, which means that all students’ names and all corresponding data will remain completely anonymous. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via email at [Jmandell](mailto:Jmandell2@schools.nyc.gov)@gmail.com or by phone at 718-444-6969.

Thank you in advance for your support!

Sincerely,

Jessica Mandell

**Please return the form below by Friday, December 2, 2016**

**Action Research Response Form**

Student’s Name: **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Yes, I give my child permission to take part in the action research study.

 No, I do not want my child to take part in the action research study.

Parents Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendicies**

**Appendix B: Principal Consent Form**

Dear Principal,

As you know I am currently a graduate student in the Childhood Education program at the City University of New York at Brooklyn College. I am conducting an action research study to see if children’s academic achievement in literacy will benefit by using music practices as a common thread.

This research will require that I select and monitor Kindergarten students, as well as acquiring parental permission to help gather data. I am requesting to use my class of fifteen Kindergarten students, in which I will incorporate literacy and music instruction, for twenty minutes, two times a week, over the course of six weeks. All of the lessons will be administered during the scheduled classroom instruction for this subject, and all standards and lesson objectives will be addressed and accomplished.

All results of this research project will be reported as a group study, which means that all students’ names and all corresponding data will remain completely anonymous. I would be happy to share the results of all corresponding data with you. If you have any other questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via email at [Jmandell@gmail.com](mailto:Jmandell@gmail.com) or by phone at 718-444-6969.

Thank you in advance for your support!

Sincerely,

Jessica Mandell